

## RESEARCHING AND WRITING: SOME GUIDANCE

Researching a topic and writing a paper on it is an important part of this course and teaches you skills that are likewise very important in the world outside the university: organizing your thoughts, analyzing and interpreting data, and arguing a point clearly, to name a few. To help you with this task, I have set aside a whole class period to teach you some good research techniques. I also summarize here some key points that I want you to bear in mind:

### Evaluating and using sources of information

**Sources of information:** There are now two general kinds of sources: print, the traditional source of information; and electronic, which is growing exponentially as a source. Each carries distinct advantages and disadvantages that students must be aware of. Some types of print sources, for example, quickly become out of date, and are expensive to purchase and maintain. On the other hand, their quality is easy to assess, as certain publishers develop reputations for producing either high-quality or low-quality books and periodicals. Books are also easier to navigate and flip through than websites, and don't require electricity or expensive computers to use.

Electronic sources have the advantage of being easy to update, and of sometimes (though certainly not always) being free (sometimes they are very expensive, as WMU Library staff know). They don't require shelf space in the Library, though they may not always be around. The quality of some electronic sources is highly suspect; as anyone can publish on the WWW, there is less quality control, and therefore students must be very careful in assessing and using them. The review system for websites is, as of yet, nowhere near as extensive as that for print sources. And, how many websites, as opposed to books, can be called "classic"? Some books continue to be standard works on their topics fifty years or more after publication. Therefore, maintain a balance in your research between print sources and electronic sources. Do not exclusively use electronic sources, however easy they are to access. Much of the best information is still in print. I will likely give a higher grade to papers using mostly print sources than to those using mostly electronic sources, depending on the topic and the availability of sources on that topic.

**Using sources in writing:** There are two things to guard against: using them excessively, and using them without attribution. In the first case, this is easy to do, as one need only, in some instances, copy and paste from Internet sources. Therefore, quote sparingly from whatever sources you use. Summarize their arguments (with proper attribution, of course), but give your own evaluation and interpretation as well—this will earn you a better grade than simply quoting sources to take up space on the page.

The second thing to guard against is **plagiarism**, which is using someone else's published words as your own, without attribution or citation. This is a major problem in universities, and when discovered almost always brings the wrath of God on the plagiarizer. In this course it will earn you a failing grade on your paper, and possibly, therefore, a failing grade in the course. When you quote from a modern scholarly work, set the quotation off in quotation marks or, if four or more lines long, in an indented block, and give all necessary attribution in a footnote. If in doubt, cite it.

## Research papers: Guidelines for writing

1. **Task and purpose:** You are to write one ten-page research paper. The purpose is two-fold: First, to demonstrate basic knowledge of an area of Western culture covered by this course (The Middle East or Europe, from 30,000 B.C. to A.D. 1400); second, to develop and improve skills in researching and writing. These skills include identifying and defining a topic; identifying and evaluating sources relevant to that topic; drawing and evaluating necessary information from those sources; and composing a paper presenting information in a coherent, organized, interesting fashion.

**What is a research paper?** A research paper investigates a particular topic of your interest related to the material of this course. It draws from and analyzes primary sources while also referring to secondary sources. It should ask questions about the topic and attempt to argue a point. I don't expect you to break new ground, as I must do in my professional research; but I do expect you to put serious thought into your topic.

**What is a research paper NOT?** A research paper is not a compilation of quotations from other sources, cut and pasted together into a collage. Such a paper does not show your own analysis—I want to hear your voice and read your words and see how you argue a point. A research paper is also not an encyclopedia article—it should not simply present all known facts about a topic in narrative form. Such articles have their use, but I want you to do more than just summarize all that is known. I want you to show why this topic is important.

2. **Intended audience:** Yourself and myself. You are writing this paper for your own benefit, according to the purposes stated above, with myself as the evaluator; you must therefore demonstrate to me what you have learned, both in terms of content and of presentation. Your position as a writer is that of a researcher; therefore, you present your research in standard academic fashion: interested in the topic, yet detached and objective enough to present all relevant information in a clear, concise writing style.

3. **Criteria for accomplishing the assignment successfully:** In no small part, getting a good grade on this paper depends on following the instructions I give here. Pay attention, therefore, to all the picky details on footnoting, bibliography, format, etc. Apart from that, a good research paper observes these other, larger points:

First, is the **topic well-defined**? For the purposes of this course, I do not expect a complex, narrow topic; but neither should the topic be too broad. Platonic philosophy or Gothic architecture are good basic topics; the contributions of the Roman Empire to Western Civilization is too broad. Additionally, keep the topic within the geographic and chronological confines of this course; while you may refer to modern culture in your paper, you should only do so as a basis of comparison with ancient or medieval culture, which must be the primary focus (i.e., no papers on modern art). Also, have you stated your topic in the form of a question? (See handout on this.)

Second, **what sources are used, and how?** See the other handout on evaluating sources for specific information on evaluating print and electronic sources. I do not mind if you use electronic sources, i.e., websites, but if you do, they should be good websites, and most of your information should come from print sources. Additionally, **you must consult primary sources**, i.e., documents written during the time period you are writing about. For example, Plato's *Republic*, the

Bible, and *The Song of Roland* are primary sources. For papers dealing with art or architecture, the objects under discussion can be considered primary sources. I expect you will use secondary sources, i.e., modern works written about ancient or medieval history. The textbook is an example of a secondary source; but **do not use the textbook in your paper**. A good research paper will use at least one primary source; the best papers will focus on them. Also, a good research paper does not simply copy information from sources; it evaluates that information.

**How many sources should you use**, and how many should be print? How many can be from websites? For a ten-page paper, I expect at least five sources. How many should be print or electronic, or how many should be primary and how many secondary will naturally vary according to your topic and the materials available on it. For our purposes, no more than half of your sources should be electronic. Electronic sources should be carefully evaluated. Don't use somebody's hobby website on medieval castles, for example—quite likely much of this material has been “borrowed” from somewhere else. Materials drawn from .edu websites are usually higher quality. **Try to avoid Wikipedia**—there are far better and more reliable electronic references tools than this. If you have any questions about any website, refer it to me.

**Third, is the paper well-written?** A paper that is poorly organized and badly written will not get a good grade. I will be happy to help you with these points; I also strongly recommend use of WMU's Writing Center. Your opening paragraph should clearly state where your paper is going and lead me into the subject; but it should do so with good academic language. Avoid the following: excessive use of “I” statements; of superlative adjectives and adverbs; and of cliché words and phrases (e.g., “it still stands today,” “basically,” “impact,” etc.). Your language should be as clear, formal, reasoned, and objective as possible. See Rampolla, pp. 61-68, on this.

**Fourth, is the paper your own work?** Buying a paper from an Internet site is unacceptable, as is plagiarism, which is using someone else's published words as your own, without attribution or citation. This is a major problem in universities, and when discovered almost always brings the wrath of God on the plagiarizer. In this course it will earn you a failing grade on your paper, and possibly, therefore, a failing grade in the course. When you quote from a modern scholarly work, set the quotation off in quotation marks or, if four or more lines long, in an indented block, and give all necessary attribution in a footnote. If in doubt, cite it. I want to hear your voice and see your work in this paper.

Fifth, do you adequately **document your sources?** By this I mean, do you provide foot/endnotes for each reference to, or use of, one of your sources in the course of your paper? And, do you provide a bibliography at the end of the paper listing all works consulted? **Failure to provide footnotes or bibliography will result in a lower grade.** You must provide both, in the specified format. See Rampolla, 136-37 for samples of the format, as well as basic guidance below.

4. **Basic format:** Typed/printed by computer (no handwritten papers will be accepted); doublespaced; margins no wider than 1.25 inches; font size should be 12-point. For foot/endnotes and bibliography, follow Turabian or The Chicago Manual of Style. For examples, see the attached sheet as well as Rampolla, Pocket guide to writing in history.

Foot/endnotes: I have no preference on which you use, just on how they are used and formatted. Use a note to present citation information when you quote, summarize, or directly refer to another

author's work; or when you must present additional information that would digress from the flow of the thought in the main body of the text. Keep this additional information to a minimum; do not turn the footnote into a separate essay. Do not use in-text citations, as they break up the flow of thought.

Citation methods: Use the methods described in *The Chicago Manual of Style* or Kate L. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*.

Basic guidance:

First citation of a book: Author's name (first, last), title of book (underlined or italicized), edition number if other than first, name of editor or translator (if applicable), city of publication, publisher, publication date (these last three in parentheses), and page number of material cited. Example:

1. Bernard Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), 63.

Subsequent citations: If in the note immediately following that containing the first or previous citation, use *ibid.*, then page number:

2. *Ibid.*, 85.

If in a note not immediately following that containing the previous citation, use the author's last name, an abbreviated title (do not use "op. cit."), and the page number:

5. Hamilton, *Religion*, 100.

Articles in journals or magazines: First citation: Author's name, title of the article (in quotation marks), title of the journal (underlined or italicized), volume and issue numbers, year of publication (in parentheses), and page number. Example:

6. David N. Bell, "Greek, Plotinus, and the Education of William of St. Thierry," *Cîteaux* 30 (1979), 223.

Subsequent citations: If in the note immediately following that containing the first or previous citation, use *Ibid.*, then page number:

7. *Ibid.*, 224.

If in a note not immediately following that containing the previous citation, use the author's last name, an abbreviated title (do not use "op. cit."), and the page number:

9. Bell, "Greek," 225.

Bibliography: At the end of your paper you should have a list, alphabetized by authors' last names, of the books, articles, and websites you quoted or read during the writing of your paper. Citation form is similar, but not identical. Give author's last name first, first name last; eliminate parentheses around publication data for books; and give full page ranges for articles. Examples:

Bell, David N. "Greek, Plotinus, and the Education of William of St. Thierry," *Cîteaux* 30 (1979), 221-248.

Hamilton, Bernard. *Religion in the Medieval West*. London: Edward Arnold, 1986.

Basic books on writing style and mechanics:

William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*.

Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Reference*.

\_\_\_\_\_, *A Pocket Style Manual*.

Sally Barr Reagan, et al., *Writing from A to Z: the Easy-to-Use Reference Handbook*.

Karen Elisabeth Gordon, *The Deluxe Transitive Vampire. The Ultimate Handbook of Grammar for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed*.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The New Well-Tempered Sentence. A Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed*.

Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*.

## Paper Topics

As a way of focusing your thoughts more clearly on your paper topics, I want you to write up your topic description in the form of a question. This will require additional preparation beyond simply telling me you want to write on the Pyramids, epic literature, or Gothic cathedrals. You will have to do preliminary research into a topic to determine what aspect of it you are interested in and why you want to write about it, and then write a paragraph, not just a sentence, describing the topic and what questions about it interest you, and therefore what questions will guide your research and writing. I expect that as your research progresses, so will the questions; your topic description is therefore intended to get you thinking about your direction.

As you doubtless have learned elsewhere, there are six key questions: Who, what, where, when, why, and how. For our purposes we will categorize these questions as follows:

1. **Descriptive questions:** who, and what. These questions ask basic information about the persons, things, or events you are researching. Who was Jesus? What is epic literature?
2. **Locating questions:** where, and when. These questions locate your person or thing in time and space. Where were the seven wonders of the ancient world? When were they built?
3. **Analytical questions:** why, and how. These questions probe more deeply into causes of events and phenomena, and the means by which they occurred. Why did the Byzantines combine elements of Roman, Greek, oriental, and Christian culture? How did the Irish save western civilization?

All these questions are important, but in particular I want your paper, and your paper topic, to ask the **analytical questions**. Your paper should focus on the **why** and **how** of a topic: How the Qur'an was composed, how and why Romanesque architecture differs from Gothic, why the Romans developed law, how the Greeks developed philosophy and drama.

On **October 12**, I want you to turn in a paragraph describing your topic in some detail and asking at least one analytical question (Why or How). You will naturally have to ask descriptive and locating questions, but they should ultimately lead to an analytical question that will be the major focus of your papers.

**This paper topic will be part of your paper grade, and is therefore required.** I will be happy to work with you in putting it together. You may, of course, suggest to me a preliminary topic verbally or in writing, but I expect you to develop this into a question.

## How to take essay exams

Essay exams test your ability to address a major theme discussed in the course and argue a point in a coherent fashion. They require you to draw from all the information you have learned in class, determine what is important for answering the question, and then present the relevant information (and not all information learned in class may directly relate to a particular question) clearly and concisely.

The **first** thing to do when answering an essay question is to **read the question**. This may sound obvious, but it is important to understand what the question is asking for. Therefore, spend a minute or two simply reading the question until you are certain what the point of it is. My essay questions may ask several different questions in a row. Usually these are several different ways of stating the basic question I want you to address, in order to help you understand what I want. They may also be sub-questions, each of which I want you to answer as part of the larger question. If this is the case, I will enumerate them, “**First . . . Second . . .**” or other wise make it clear that these are required points.

**Second, organize your thoughts.** Make a brief list of pieces of information that will be useful in answering the question. This is the basic content of your essay; this is your **evidence**. What things that I have learned so far bear on this question? When you have written them down, put them into some sort of order of presentation. **Make an outline.** Don’t simply start writing down random bits of information. Order them so that one bit may lead into another. This requires some thought about the meaning of all this information— that is, **form an argument based on the evidence**. Doing this is just as important as knowing the content. Avoid “stream of consciousness” essay answers.

**Third, begin writing.** If possible present an initial argument and then elaborate it with the evidence you have assembled. Use that information and content to create and support your argument. It is not enough simply to know content; neither is it enough to have an opinion about the question at hand. Arguments must be based on specific points of evidence, and individual pieces of information must be assembled into a meaningful whole. Content without argument is meaningless; argument without supporting evidence is baseless. Learn to interrelate the two and make them dependent on each other.

**Fourth, summarize.** Come back to your opening argument and restate it; show once more how all the evidence supports your main point.

The essay exams that get the best grades are those that show mastery of content and the ability to organize content into a clear argument.

## Cartwright's dos and don'ts of writing well

### Basic rules:

1. Keep it simple. Use as few words as possible to make your point. Keep your sentences as simple as possible—no convoluted sentences.
2. Write complete sentences with a clear subject and strong main verb.
3. Use the active voice and avoid the passive voice. That way I won't make comments such as "By whom?" when you write things such as "The Parthenon is regarded as the best work of Greek architecture."

### Words and phrases to avoid or think about carefully:

1. "Impact" as a verb or noun. Use "affect" or "influence" as a verb, and "effect" as a noun.
2. "Hopefully" as a verb. It's an adverb. It modifies verbs. You're best off deleting this from your vocabulary entirely.
3. "Basically." It means nothing and wastes space.
4. "based off of": You don't base something "off of" something else; you base something *on* it. A base is a foundation *on* which you build; it is an integral part of what proceeds from it, and is not separated from it, as "based off of" implies.
5. "In my opinion." "I feel that." I know it's your opinion--your name is on the paper. "Feel" is weak.
6. "Quote" as a noun. It's a verb, whose corresponding noun is "quotation."
7. "have thoughts of," "thoughts such as," Horribly awkward. Use the verb "think" or "thought."
8. "Due to the fact that": Clumsy. Replace with "Because."

### Spelling confusions to avoid:

1. To/too/two
2. Their/there/ they're
3. where/were
4. definitely/defiantly